

THE HISTORY ASSOCIATION
International Students' Conference 2012
CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL STUDIES
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Writing Histories of Power/Contestation

20 - 22 February, 2012

Power and contestation have pervaded human experience(s) at multiple levels – how does a historian grapple with this? Men and women are not merely passive objects of power. Their subject positions are shaped by how they assert, negotiate, challenge, transgress, subvert, resist or succumb to power. Through the never-ending play of this process, the meanings of power and contestation themselves get configured and reconfigured. Yet, power and its contestations cannot be decoupled – each act of contestation is also an act of power.

The historiography of power and contestation is rich and varied. The location of power, its articulation in discourse and practice, its representation as well as its diverse expressions – visible/invisible, enabling/disabling have provoked major debates. The richness of these debates can be traced to the conceptual shifts in the approaches to such questions. The shifts can be located, in our times, in thrusts from both within and outside academia. While inter-disciplinary interventions have been significant, broader tensions have also reconfigured classrooms as a site of rethinking questions of power and its contestation. Thus, the idea of power has broadened and changed over time. Historians have sought to engage with the newer understandings of power by employing inventive tools of analysis.

The conference would think through the question of power and its contestation by journeying through varied historical themes. This exercise hopes to provide space to look at both the subject we study and the politics/power we practice as historians. Given the range of issues that this theme may cover, we have condensed them under the following possible sub-themes, which shall form the broad basis of the seminar.

Questions of Identity

Identities are socially constituted and are continually negotiated. They refer to various ways in which a person or a group understands himself/herself/itself and is understood by others. The formation, reinvention and dissolution of identities – caste, class, gender, nationality, language etc. – is historically contingent. Identities are multiple. At certain historical junctures, one identity may come to dominate a person's sense of self vis-à-vis the other.

How identities are constructed, how they become rigid or fluid, and how they are transgressed is heavily influenced by the articulation of power by different individuals/groups. In this section, we are looking for papers that deal with various issues relating to the constitution of identities and their articulation. We hope for an engagement with the way the exercise of political, social, cultural, economic and religious power is an integral part of the processes of identity formation and articulation – a sphere of ceaseless contestation.

Power and Institutions

The exercise of power, its articulations and manifestations – whether strategically deployed or not – often take myriad institutionalized forms. The institutionalized expressions of power, in discourse and practice, in the realms of the social, political, economic, legal, religious, educational and so on, are historically constituted and reconstituted. Power and contestation is central to the formation of institutions, and in the changes they undergo through negotiating challenges from within and without. The challenges to institutional power have come from both its victims and its peers. These expressions of power are often direct and tangible, and so are the contestations of it. At the same time, historians have also understood institutional power as exercised through sanitized norms and ideologies that seek to dictate and determine actions.

Under this sub-theme, we are interested in understanding institutional power in its varied forms, and the various forms of contestations it faces. From the organization and operation of armies, police or other executive wings, issues related to law, bureaucracy, to educational bodies, hospitals, mental asylums, censor boards and religious organisations – any institution may be brought under the purview of this sub-theme.

Production and Exchange: Relations, Processes and Practices

This sub-theme will seek to incorporate the rich and extensive corpus of what one may call economic histories and explore how economic relations are shaped by power and contestation. The attempt shall be to look at both macro-economic as well as micro-economic analysis. The macro-economic analysis would enable an understanding of economic activities like trade and commerce, finance, agriculture, technologies of productions along with larger socio-political and cultural processes. The micro-economic dimensions will help us see how macro-economic processes or manifestations of power are lived through, contested or negotiated at an everyday level.

An attempt shall also be made to locate the study of the 'economic' within a broader context – to explore how the political, social and cultural processes influence economic relations. What comes under purview is therefore a wide range of enterprises – from agricultural and craft production to trade and exchange relations, from production and circulation of artefacts or texts to the formation and dissemination of certain cultural codes. Locating the economic within the wider context, in this subsection we hope to deal with productive purposes and practices and also get an opportunity to revisit what one may call the deeply contested ‘mode of production’ debate.

Encountering Spaces

In exploring the questions of power and its contestation, one must set the context for its operation. In this effort, one needs to engage with alternative perspectives on space. The changing historiography has brought to fore the question of space as constitutive of and configured by the theatrics and technologies of power and simultaneously by its contestations. Whether imagined as ‘sites’, or understood as poles – private/public, sacred/profane, wild/civilized, urban/rural – or engaged through the encounter between people and their surroundings, this larger trend helps us historicize the politics of space and the complex interplay of power in such processes.

Scholars have sought to understand the strategies through which spaces are marked, figuratively and literally, in discourse and in practice, with symbols of power and its contestation(s). They have also looked into the way spaces are encountered, explored, and written about, and how power informs these processes – both at the level of institutions and everyday life. Historians have read spaces by foregrounding its materiality, by focusing on technologies of language, or by exploring human

experiences.

This sub-theme hopes to elicit an engagement with the processes of constitution and reconstitution of spaces through acts of power and contestation, while remaining cognizant of the multiple perspectives from which spatiality can be understood.

Representations

Literary texts, architecture, material culture, art, oral narratives are all different forms through which human emotions, ambitions, ideas and memory are represented by individuals/groups and conveyed to others. These may serve as modes for rendering the real world into a world of signs, through a range of tools and codes of representation. Dominant groups may see these modes of representation as sites for expressing power. These may come to be subverted, challenged and contested by others. Different sections of society produce their own understandings of texts, art forms, and narratives to mark social, cultural, political distinctions. These may simply be marking out a difference, rather than contesting other understandings of the same. These various modes of representations are constituted by power and its contestation. The locations of diverse social groups affect the production, circulation and reception of these representations.

This sub-theme hopes to elicit an engagement with various representations of power and contestation, and the way the representations themselves are constituted by power and contestation – across social and cultural locations as well as across time.

Participants are requested to send in detailed, 1000-word abstracts of their papers by 20 December, 2011. Selected candidates will be notified by the first week of January, 2012. They should then positively send in their complete papers by mid-February, 2012. At the conference, each participant will have 20 minutes to present his/her paper, and the discussion of each session will be led by a discussant. Participants will be provided accommodation for four nights (19 - 22 February, 2012), as well as three-tier AC train fare. We are not in a position to pay for airfare for international participants.

All correspondence related to the conference should be addressed to: power.contestation@gmail.com